



Testimony of
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Education Committee
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HB 6881 An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to
Educator Compensation and Paraeducators

Good afternoon Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Yokasty Thomas, and I am a resident of Windsor. I have worked as a paraeducator for 17 years. Now I am transitioning to becoming a teacher in the Hartford Public Schools District. I offer the following testimony in support of HB 6881 An Act Concerning Various Revisions to the Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators.

Paraeducators are on the front lines of student learning. We provide one-on-one assistance to special education students, reinforce instruction, manage classrooms and support English language learners. We celebrate with our students when they succeed and try to redirect them when they act out verbally and physically. Despite the important roles we play, paraeducators are among the lowest paid staff members in our schools. We can't afford our healthcare and there is little chance we can afford to retire with dignity - unless we work a second or third job. We don't get paid during the summer and we can't collect unemployment. There is no wonder paraeducators are leaving the profession in droves, leaving more than 1,300 paraeducator positions vacant in districts throughout the state.

HB 6881 is an important step in improving the work life and career opportunities of Connecticut's paraeducators. But most of all this bill is an opportunity to begin to treat paraeducators with the respect and dignity we have earned.

Working as a paraeducator we are on the frontline for our students daily, we are one of the first faces, smiles, and hugs they receive in the morning when they arrive at school after we continue to the cafeteria or homeroom to start our day. As a paraeducator our responsibility varies, some of us work as part of the behavior team, one-to-one support, program or classroom paraeducators, and others.

As paraeducators, some of our duties are:

- We provide one-to-one or small-group assistance in the classroom.
- We collect data to track student growth, behavior, or medical issues in case of seizures or other medical needs.
- We assist with students' physical needs such as feeding, diapering, social skills, life skills, academics, etc.
- We serve as substitute teachers for teachers who are out sick or on personal leave, but we don't get paid as much as a substitute teacher would.
- We assist teachers with modifications and accommodations for the students.
- We assist students with behavior problems inside and outside the classroom.
- As bilingual paraeducators, we also translate at PPT (Planning and Placement Team) meetings.
- We also perform other duties.

Starting salaries for paraeducators are approximately \$24,000 a year. We have paraeducators with 13 years in the education system with bachelor's degrees, some with master's degrees earning less than \$32,000 a year. With these salaries and the high deductible health insurance (HSA), it is impossible to have a decent life without the need for a second job. Our students are paying for the consequences of the shortage of paraeducators, and many of them are not getting the services and support they need in the classroom. Throughout the years, I have seen many paraeducators come and go due to the low pay of our profession.

For years, paraeducators' jobs have been undervalued and underpaid. On occasions we have been called "babysitters," but it is proven that we are far more than that. We care, we show up, and we give the best to our students. We enjoy the job we perform. We are proud of assisting our students.

Now is the time for this committee and all the members of the General Assembly to take immediate and meaningful action to raise paraeducator pay, lower our healthcare costs, ensure we have meaningful retirement benefits, and give us the tools we need to help students succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Please support student learning by prioritizing paraeducators and passing HB 6881.